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## Value Perspective: A Necessary Condition for Photographic Art

Michelle Marie Burdine

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VALUE PERSPECTIVE: A NECESSARY CONDITION FOR PHOTOGRAPHIC ART

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Humanities

By

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B.A., Antioch McGregor, 2005

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2013

Wright State University

WRIGHT STATE UNIVERSITY  
GRADUATE SCHOOL

April 25, 2013

I HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER MY  
SUPERVISION BY Michelle Marie Burdine ENTITLED Value Perspective: A Necessary  
Condition for Photographic Art BE ACCEPTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE  
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF Master of Humanities.

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## ABSTRACT

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The conjoined relationship photography has with technology complicates conversations about photography as art because this relationship allows photography to be used interchangeably for practical, social, and commercial purposes, as well as for art. A theory of art for photography is needed in order to accurately separate photographic art from vernacular photography. I show that photography has a unique relationship with technology, which has served to promote the rapid democratization of photography, and that the photographic arts have been treated differently from the greater fine arts. This is especially evident when photographic portraiture is compared with painted portraiture. I offer my own “value perspective” theory as a solution to the problem and show why photography cannot accept existing theories of art by George Dickie, Arthur Danto, or R.G. Collingwood.

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## I

Photography, a relatively young technology and art, continues to elude a single, concise answer to the many questions that have been proposed regarding its place in the world. Is it a form of art or a great achievement of technology which should be used for commercial gain?<sup>1</sup> Is photography among the most exciting inventions in the history of human inventions, as expressed in 1840 by Edgar Allan Poe<sup>2</sup>, or is it “a form of lunacy” which will lead directly to the downfall of art and humanity as Charles Baudelaire stated in 1859?<sup>3</sup> Walter Benjamin, in his essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,”<sup>4</sup> surmised that photography could either help to liberate the masses from the oppression of ritual or be used as a tool for the institutionalization of art. Photography’s dualistic nature makes it possible for the medium to be a valuable tool for science and art. On one hand photography is conjoined with technology, making it a logical choice for practical uses that require an imitative likeness, while on the other hand photography provides an excellent avenue for artistic expression.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Hirsch, *Seizing the Light: A History of Photography*, (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2000), 11-2.

<sup>2</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “The Daguerrotype,” in *Classic Essays on Photography*, ed. Alan Trachtenberg (New Haven: Leete’s Island Books, 1980), 37.

<sup>3</sup> Sabine T. Kriebel, “Theories of Photography: A Short History,” in *Photography Theory*, ed. James Elkins (New York: Routledge, 2007), 7-8.

<sup>4</sup> Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968).



Photography has been used for practical, social, commercial, scientific, and artistic purposes since its invention. The pervasive nature of photography has developed in tandem with new technology. It is difficult to think of a field of occupation or study that does not use photography or photographic technology in some way. Lady Eastlake noted that within the first twenty years of its invention photography had become “a household word and a household want.”<sup>5</sup> Her poetic description of the ways in which photography is used, written in her 1857 essay “Photography,”<sup>6</sup> well documents the many applications for photography, leading to the craze. She says:

“ . . . photography . . . is used alike by art and science, by love, business, and justice; is found in the most sumptuous saloon, and in the dingiest attic—in the solitude of the Highland cottage and in the glare of the London gin-palace—in the pocket of the detective, in the cell of the convict, in the folio of the painter and architect, among the papers and patterns of the mill-owner and manufacturer, and on the cold brave breast on the battle-field.”<sup>7</sup>

Eastlake lists art as one of the uses of photography, but her essay concludes the opposite. Although photographers such as Julia Margaret Cameron created works of art with photography from the first decades of its invention, there was not an immediate universal academic or popular acceptance of photography as art. While photography was immediately and widely praised for its scientific and social uses, it is difficult to state the

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<sup>5</sup> Lady Elizabeth Eastlake, “Photography” in *Photography: Essays and Images*, ed. Beaumont Newhall (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1980), 81.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

exact time when photography became widely accepted as an art by mainstream popular culture and by the institutions of the artworld.

Regardless of academic acceptance or recognition, people immediately began using photography as a way to express themselves. Images were created from photography's infancy that would later be claimed as art, despite the fact that recognition by the artworld was not initially widespread. In 1853 Sir William J. Newton wrote an essay suggesting photographers could make photographs look more like paintings by allowing them to go a little out of focus.<sup>8</sup> The sharp focus and deep depth of field of early photography did not allow the artist to draw the eye of the viewer to a certain area, or idealize the scene or person being photographed the way a painter could. Eastlake echoed this idea, describing further why photography was not an art. She says, "The sharp perfection of objects . . . is exactly as detrimental to art as it is complimentary to science,"<sup>9</sup> and concludes that photography is an excellent tool for science and "a new form of communication," but by no means art.<sup>10</sup> In order to be more accepted by the artworld, many photographers "produced gauzy, atmospheric images" during the pictorialism movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>11</sup> Cameron made a similar choice. She said, "When focusing and coming to something which to my eye was very beautiful I stopped there, instead of screwing on the lens to the more

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<sup>8</sup> Sir William, J. Newton, "Upon Photography in an Artistic View, and its Relation to the Arts" in *Photography: Essays and Images*, ed. Beaumont Newhall (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1980), 79-80.

<sup>9</sup> Eastlake, 92.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 94.

<sup>11</sup> Mark Getlein, *Living with Art*, 8<sup>th</sup> ed. (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2008), 219.

definite focus which all other photographers insist upon.”<sup>12</sup> Cameron in this way distanced herself from the mainstream popular photography of her day (fig.1).

Alfred Stieglitz, initially a successful pictorialist, abandoned the style (fig.2) when he decided that “for photography to be an art, it must be true to its own nature.”<sup>13</sup> Ansel Adams, born about forty years after Stieglitz, also embraced photography’s connection with technology. Adams believed that photographic images which showed an understanding of science, rather than denied photography’s connection to it, would result in art.<sup>14</sup> Edward Steichen, a contemporary of Stieglitz, combined art and commercial photography. Steichen and Stieglitz opened the famous gallery 291, which was among the first American galleries to promote all modern arts, including photography, as fine arts. Steichen was also the first Director of the Department of Photography at New York’s Museum of Modern Art. At the same time, Steichen was known as the first modern fashion photographer (fig.3) because of the photographs he produced for *Vogue* and *Vanity Fair*.<sup>15</sup>

For many theorists, works by photographers such as Adams, Stieglitz, and Steichen, among others, show that photography was accepted by the artworld no later than the early 1900’s. However, widespread acceptance by the artworld in the early 1900’s still eluded photography given the evidence that almost all photographers of this time, like Steichen, could only make a living by selling their images for commercial

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<sup>12</sup> Colin Ford, *Julia Margaret Cameron: A Critical Biography* (London: National Portrait Gallery Publications, 2003), 42.

<sup>13</sup> Getlein, 219.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 221.

<sup>15</sup> Steichen used principles that were true to the nature of photography in his advertising work allowing those images to be seen as both commercial and artistic.

purposes. In addition, Stieglitz and Steichen opened their own gallery in order to show photographic work as fine art since no other American galleries were promoting photography through exhibitions.

Kriebel reports that the curators of American museums eventually agreed with the movement by the photographers discussed above to promote photography as a fine art in its own right, based on its own merits, which were different than painting and sculpture. She says, “The 1960’s mark photography’s decisive entry into the institutions of the fine arts, from museums to the art market.”<sup>16</sup> It is safe to conclude that there is not a single point in time that photography was universally accepted as art. While the potential to view photography as art was seen immediately and photographs were being created from the beginning that would later be promoted as fine art, the growing sense of photography as a fine art that was present from at least the 1900’s was not definitively supported by the artworld until the 1960’s.

One reason the broad category of photography has had a hard time being accepted as a fine art could be that there are many more photographic images created which are not categorized as art, because they are obviously not intended to be art. One approach to making sense of this pervasive characteristic is to simply accept that some photographic images are practical or social, a form of photography which many label as “vernacular photography,” while other photographic images are fine art. However, the line between photography as a technology<sup>17</sup> and photography as an art is not as simple as it at first appears. For example, X-rays are reasonably claimed to be technology rather than art;

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<sup>16</sup> Kriebel, 15.

<sup>17</sup> Technology as understood to mean man’s manipulation and control of the natural world as opposed to a science which studies the natural world for the sake of knowledge.

however, photographic artists such as Nick Veasey use X-ray film to create images that are not used in any way for medical purposes (fig.4). On the other hand, we see images of people, a common aesthetic subject, used by the field of psychology to identify and categorize the muscles that cause emotions to appear in the human face (fig.5).<sup>18</sup> Artists can use any type of materials needed to produce their art. There is no rule which states that X-ray film can be used for medical purposes only, and cannot be used by photographers. Of course it would be silly to suggest one.

Photography is also an extremely useful way to produce a detailed exact representation, imitation, or copy. Additionally, photography is almost necessary for commercial sales. Few people buy something from a written or verbal description alone. Practical and social uses for photography are continually growing as society expands and new technology is developed. At the same time, artists can use any and all materials they desire for their creations. The fact that photographic technology and materials are used interchangeably to create art, snapshots, educational materials, science and medical images, et cetera, is confusing. This crossover blurs the line between vernacular photography and fine art photography, making it difficult to define exact boundaries.

The distinction between photography as an art and photography used for social, practical, and commercial purposes has been established. How then, when talking about photographic images as art, can one distinguish fine art from the vernacular? The way to move forward is evident; photography must have a theory which first establishes the minimal criteria for any photographic image to be critiqued as a work of art, and second,

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<sup>18</sup> Los Angeles County Museum of Art, "Gymnastics of the Soul: The Clinical Aesthetics of Duchanne de Boulogne" in *Ghost in the Shell: Photography and the Human Soul, 1850-2000* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 36-79.

moves beyond the physical qualities and appearance of an image and the materials used to create it. If such a theory for photographic art is established, it will serve as a tool to distinguish photographic images that are works of art from the onslaught of images created on a daily basis for non-artistic purposes. This proposed theory would add needed consistency to intellectual discussions regarding the photographic arts.

One possible theory that could be a potentially viable philosophy of photographic art is this: a photograph should be considered a work of fine art if the photographer is attempting to communicate a specific perspective. Although “perspective” is a broad term, here it is meant to signify the artist’s perspective in the sense of personal values and beliefs, rather than the perspective of the image in a visual sense. The perspective that the artist is attempting to communicate could be about the subject of the photograph or it could be communicated through the subject. The “subject” of the photograph is whatever the photographer chooses to capture, even if it is abstract or unidentifiable. I will argue that a photograph is not art unless the photographer is: 1) attempting to communicate to the viewer his or her perspective through the subject being photographed and 2) that perspective is one of value. In order to make clear this distinction, this concept will be referred to as “value perspective.” While this theory is not necessarily limited to photography, it will only be discussed as a theory of photography in this essay.

By showing that photography has a conjoined relationship with technology which is different from painting, sculpture, architecture, music, and poetry (collectively referred to as the greater fine arts), and that photography’s relationship with technology has served to promote the rapid democratization of photography, the value perspective theory will prevail as an accurate tool for determining works of photographic fine art. The

discussion of photography's conjoined relationship with technology will also show that the photographic arts have been treated differently than the greater fine arts. Portraiture is a genre where this is particularly evident. A comparison between the position held by painted portraits and photographic portraits will show how photography as a whole has been treated differently from the greater fine arts by both popular culture and by the institution of art, often called the artworld.

After the case is made for a theory of photography that takes into account technology, democratization, and photography's comparatively unique status, I will apply my value perspective theory to past and current images in order to illustrate its effectiveness. Finally, it will be necessary to consider why photography cannot adopt other established theories of art. Although many theories of art exist, a comparison will be made between value perspective theory and George Dickie's institutional theory of art<sup>19</sup> and Arthur Danto's transfiguration philosophy of art.<sup>20</sup> These two philosophies are among the most prominent and enduring theories of modern and avant-garde art, which makes them the most pertinent to photography. R.G Collingwood's work, *The Principles of Art*<sup>21</sup>, will also be discussed because it is so closely related to the value perspective theory that it is necessary to distinguish the differences between the two theories.

This comparison of the value perspective theory to these three additional theories results in two conclusions. First, a theory stating precisely what constitutes a work of fine art photography is needed. Second, value perspective theory, which claims that the value

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<sup>19</sup> George Dickie, *Art and the Aesthetic: An Institutional Analysis* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974).

<sup>20</sup> Arthur C. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981).

<sup>21</sup> R. G. Collingwood, *The Principles of Art* (London, Oxford University Press, 1938).

perspective of the photographer as shown through the created image is necessary for the possibility of creating works of fine art photography, is the right theory for photography.

The value perspective theory does not attempt to comment on which images are to be considered good art and which are to be considered bad art. Instead, its foundation is built on the position that, although photography is a way of making art, not all images produced by photographic means are, in fact, art. From this assumption I will show that photography has a conjoined relationship with technology which causes photography to be different in fact and treatment from the greater fine arts. While photography's relationship to technology may not be unique to photography given that many art forms established after the employment of mechanical reproduction, such as printmaking, have many similarities to photography, it does separate photography from the greater fine arts.<sup>22</sup> Photography's conjoined relationship with technology can be shown through a short history of the invention of photography.

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<sup>22</sup> Printmaking and other forms of art that rely on mechanical reproduction could very likely adopt the value perspective theory. However, as stated above, in order to keep my argument concise, I will not be arguing for the adoption of the value perspective theory for any form of art other than photography, and am only claiming that photography's relationship with technology is unique from the commonly accepted greater fine arts of painting, sculpture, music, architecture, and poetry.



## *II*

The technology that led to the invention of photography was possible only after scientific discoveries about light rays were made. The earliest known account of the way that light passing through a small hole will project an image of the scene behind it on a flat opposing wall were made by Mo Tzu in the fifth century B.C.E. and by Aristotle about 150 years later. In the tenth century C.E., “Alhazen (Ibn Al-Haitham) demonstrated how . . . images formed through an aperture became sharper when the opening was made smaller.”<sup>23</sup> In 1646 Leonardo da Vinci described the camera obscura, as it would later be called, in great detail. A camera obscura, or “dark room,” is any box with a small hole in one wall of the box. Artists used the camera obscura as a tool for projecting a scene which they wanted to accurately render.<sup>24</sup>

Science alone could not produce an image that was permanently fixed to a material such as tin, glass, or paper. Technology was needed. If technology is understood as man’s manipulation and control of the natural world, then photography is certainly a child of several basic technological developments. In 1550, Girolamo Cardano first “mentioned attaching a biconvex lens . . . to a camera.”<sup>25</sup> The invention of the telescope paved the way for different lenses to be tried on the camera obscura. The beginning of the

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<sup>23</sup> Hirsch, 3-4.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 4-5.

fifteenth century brought Johannes Kepler, who coined the term “camera obscura” when he presented his work on mirrors, lenses, vision, and light rays.<sup>26</sup> Still, camera obscuras were only being used at this time to aid painters.

In the 1700’s, significant progress was made with chemistry. For example, in 1725 Johann Heinrich Shultz “distinguished between the action of light and heat on silver salts.”<sup>27</sup> Another significant contribution was the discovery of catalysis by Elizabeth Fulhame, which was published in 1794 in her book *An Essay on Combustion with a View to a New Art of Dying and Painting*. Hirsch says, “Her work demonstrated that the chemistry to make a photographic process was in place.”<sup>28</sup> By 1802 Thomas Wedgwood was able to record images with silver, but was unsuccessful at stopping the silver from continuing to turn black. However, the knowledge gained by these first attempts made it possible for others to stop the development of, or “fix,” the photographic image. Joseph Nicéphore Niepce was the first to fix the photograph image in 1824, but his time-consuming, impractical process did not catch on. Louis Jacques Mande Daguerre, William Henry Fox Talbot, Hippolyte Bayard, and Sir John Frederick William Herschel were all working at the same time with slightly different processes, but Daguerre was put in the history books as “the first” with the announcement and public demonstration of his photographic process, called the Daguerreotype, in 1839.<sup>29</sup>

Technology both enabled the birth of photography and fed it throughout its formative years. Nearly every decade has produced another major technological

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<sup>26</sup> Helmut Gernsheim, *The Origins of Photography* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1982), 14.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 20.

<sup>28</sup> Hirsch, 7-8.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 13.

development for photography. In 1840 William Fox Talbot published his calotype<sup>30</sup> process which gave us negatives; the 1850's brought Frederick Scott Archer's collodion process; the dryplate process was introduced in the 1860's, as well as the first color print. In 1873 Hermann Vogel made significant improvements to the color process, while George Eastman, who founded the Eastman Kodak company, developed film technology in 1884 and the box camera in 1888. The 1890's brought inventions dealing with cinematography.

The pace did not slow at the start of the twentieth century. In addition to photographic processes, ever-new camera technology allowed wider participation, lower cost, and increased mobility. In 1900 Kodak introduced the Brownie roll film camera. In 1925 the Leica camera added 35mm roll film as an option for still photography, and in 1935, 35mm film became easy to use when the film cartridge was introduced.<sup>31</sup> The forties, fifties, and sixties saw commercial competition expand with Polaroid and eye-level viewing 35mm cameras, and in 1959 the first fully automatic film camera was introduced to the market. Finally, photography was promoted as a fine art by various members of the artworld, including private collectors, galleries, and historians in the 1960's.<sup>32</sup>

Photography's early history shows that rapid technological development was a defining characteristic of photography, and that photography is inseparable from

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<sup>30</sup> For more information about early photographic processes discussed in this essay, I recommend Christopher James, *The Book of Alternative Photographic Processes*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Delmar, 2009).

<sup>31</sup> The film cartridge came in different sizes and eliminated the need to correctly engage the lead end of the 35mm film with the sprocket holes to load the film into the camera. Simply dropping the entire cartridge into the back of the camera would load the film correctly.

<sup>32</sup> Kriebel, 15.

technology in a way that is not true of the greater fine arts; however, it does not explain why a theory of photographic art which recognizes this is needed. Photography's link with technology is evident. So, while it is easy to accept that photography has an intimate relationship with technology, more is required if a new theory of photographic art is to be accepted as necessary or useful.

A new theory of photographic art is needed because digital technology has changed the photographic process and photographic involvement so significantly that we can no longer judge photographic images as art by standards that do not recognize technology as an intimate factor in photography. From its invention until about the 1960's, new analog technology was being rapidly invented. These inventions covered all areas of photography including processes, equipment, and chemical and mechanical technology which dealt with capturing an image as well as printing an image. Around the 1960's, photographic artworld emphasis shifted from technical progress to theoretical and conceptual developments. The existing analog technology got better, faster, cheaper, and stronger, but new analog technology was at a comparative plateau. In the meantime, digital technology picked up where analog had left off.

Although the first digital image was produced on a computer in 1957 (fig.6), digital photography had to go through the same lengthy process as analog photography before it could become commercially viable. During the forty or so years that digital capture and process systems were being worked out, analog photographic images were readily being engaged by the fine art community. The conversations regarding fine art photography were as diverse as the uses for the medium. But a theory of photographic art that fully acknowledges and considers photography's unique relationship to

technology is needed if the theory is to have practical value. This is particularly evident given the impact of photography's most recent technological applications: digital imaging and the internet.

The past two decades have witnessed a change from limited to abundant accessibility of these two technologies, and they have significantly changed the world of photography. Digital imaging and the internet have produced yet another way in which photographs can be captured, processed, and shared. In the introduction to *Photography Theory*, Sabine Kriebel addresses a gap in philosophical conversations concerning photographic theory. Specifically she notes, "... what is still missing from many accounts is how the medium and its various evolving incarnations signify in its particular contexts . . . . How do the material and physical processes of different photographic practices contribute to the meaning of the image represented?"<sup>33</sup> Kriebel believes that not enough is being said among philosophers about the physical materials used by photographers. A discussion of how these processes affect the meaning of the images is not enough, however. Rather, a discussion is needed about how the constantly changing physical processes, or technology, affects the specific materials used to create what is calls "photography." Kriebel agrees. She says, "A clear definition of intrinsic, universal qualities of a photograph would be, at the very outset, hampered by its dependence on technological change."<sup>34</sup> Digital photography and widespread internet access have changed the photographic process radically once again. Therefore, the time has come to discuss how photography's transformative property of reinvention through technology

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<sup>33</sup> Kriebel, 43.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 4.

affects the broad understanding of photographic art and makes obvious the need for a theory of photographic art that accepts this reality as a foundational principle.

Technological advances, specifically digital and internet technology, continue to change photography to the point that the application of traditional artistic criteria, such as aesthetic value or technical skill, can no longer be the primary criteria used to distinguish art photographic images from vernacular photographic images. Photography's conjoined relationship with technology has a significant effect on one area specifically, barriers to participation, or, what it is often called, the democratization of photography.

The first way that technology has democratized photography is through a continuous reduction of necessary technical skill to the point that now, with digital capture photography and the internet, it is almost unnecessary. It is now possible to capture an image with a completely automated camera and upload that image directly from the camera to the Web for public viewing. In addition, this can be done with almost no choices (technical or creative) being made by the person capturing and posting the image, and with almost no delay between the capture and the sharing of the image. Allowing more people to participate by reducing the level of skill needed has always been part of photography. For example, skill was advertised as "not required" as early as 1900 when Kodak introduced the popular "Brownie" camera with the slogan "You push the button, we do the rest!" Digital photography takes the ease of operation first introduced by the concept of the Brownie to a much higher level.

It might be argued that, while technical skill is not *necessary*, it is indeed helpful, and lack of skill can easily prevent successful artistic communication through a photographic image. This objection, while true, is not relevant, as *necessity* is the key

point. Whether or not technical skills are helpful to the success of the image goes back to the question of good art versus bad art which is not being considered in this essay. The fact that it is just *possible* to capture an image and share it with a world-wide audience, nearly instantly and without extra money, while possessing almost no technical skill, is the significant way in which technology has most recently and most significantly broken down barriers to participation.

The second way that digital and internet technology has significantly and rapidly democratized photography is with time savings. There is no waiting for digital photography. There is no waiting while you send your Brownie camera to be loaded with film. There is no waiting for your processed film and pictures to come back from the lab. The time to do these tasks yourself is also eliminated. There is minimal time delay between pushing the button and seeing your results. Even with instant Polaroid film the photographer has to wait a few minutes to see every attempt, and each attempt adds additional monetary expense. Digital photography has eliminated the processing part of capturing an image. Even with instant analog systems, the photographer clicked the shutter and then had to wait until the processing was accomplished to see the results. With digital photography, there is effectively no latent image, which frees photographers from either having to have technical skill themselves or from having to pay someone else who has technical skill and then being forced to wait to see the results. With digital photography, unlimited attempts at capturing an image can happen immediately and are free.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Additional attempts are limited by space on the compact flash card that is storing the images, but unlike film, any “bad” exposures can simply be deleted, thereby freeing up more space on the card.

Finally, digital and internet technology have democratized photography by significantly growing the viewing base. So, in addition to greatly reducing needed technical skill and nearly eliminating the time delay before seeing the initial results, a G4 camera phone, for instance, compared to the Brownie, allows for an incomparably larger audience, and one which is quickly available for viewing images on the internet.

The democratization of photography has taken place continuously from the beginning of photography. Digital technology has caused a rapid increase in what was already part of photography and therefore calls attention to the fact that photography needs a theory of art that recognizes the direct impact that technology has on photography. Photography has a conjoined relationship with technology in general, which has fostered the democratization of photography. Digital and internet technology specifically has: eliminated necessary technical skill; significantly reduced the time involved in especially the beginning stages of the photographic process; provided nearly instant feedback; and allowed for a larger viewing audience in a much quicker time frame. Therefore, it is important to discuss exactly how the democratization of photography has affected photography as a form of art.

The principal ways that the democratization of photography has affected photography are both in the increased use of photography for non-artistic purposes and the increase of images being called “art.” If a modern theory of photographic art is adopted, then the increase of photography for non-artistic uses will not affect photographic art images, as the theory will provide the tools needed by viewers to be able to distinguish one from the other. The increase of images being made in the name of art is not in itself a problem. After all, art need not be exclusive to be powerful. However,



some criteria are needed if the term “art” is to be meaningful. A quick survey of the social media site of your choice will reveal person after person posting their “art,” and even more fans referring to those images as beautiful works of art. Perhaps, since, as I claim, digital photography allows nearly anyone to make photographic art, they are in fact making art. If you agree that anything and everything is art, then we can stop here with the conclusion that digital technology has democratized photography to the point that all images are art. But, if all images are art, then we must reject the concept of good and bad art, because without specific criteria for determining what art is, there is no reason for choosing any particular criteria to measure the quality of the images. The category of things called art would be uninformative because it excludes nothing, and therefore gives no direction for critical analysis. But, if you believe that some images are better art than others and that having a category of images called art inherently means that some images are not art, then a meaningful definition of photographic art needs to be adopted in order to distinguish one from the other.

We can conclude then, that technology is intimately connected to photography. In addition, this special relationship has facilitated a continuous democratization of photography which has increased rapidly in the last decade due to continued advancements and greater accessibility of digital and internet technology. Having almost no barriers to participation has allowed photography to be a valuable tool for non-artistic uses that rely on imitation, such as photography used for social and practical purposes. This contributes to the photographic arts being viewed differently from the greater arts.

### III

Although it appears easy to distinguish non-artistic uses of photography from uses intended to be artistic, this task can prove to be elusive. However, the genre of portraiture clearly illustrates why this is so and how photography has been treated differently from the greater arts. There can be no argument that portrait paintings and sculptures are an enduring genre of the fine arts. Although many artists had “dismissive attitudes towards portraiture,” in the seventeenth century, the French Royal Academy ranked the genre of portraiture as second only to history painting, in terms of importance or value.<sup>36</sup> Photographic portraiture, on the other hand, is not so clearly accepted. Photographic portraiture shares the quality of imitation with non-artistic forms of photography, such as medical and ID photos. At the same time, portraiture is a genre that is clearly accepted as art in painting and sculpture by the artworld and popular culture alike. Therefore, portraiture is a genre that well illustrates how photography is viewed differently from the greater arts.

Jan Baetens, in her essay “Conceptual Limitations of Our Reflection on Photography: The question of ‘Interdisciplinarity,’” addresses the absence of practicing photographers included in philosophical discussions about photography.<sup>37</sup> As I am a

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<sup>36</sup> Shearer West, *Portraiture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 12.

<sup>37</sup> Jan Baetens, “Conceptual Limitations of Our Reflection on Photography: The Question of ‘Interdisciplinarity,’” in *Photography Theory*, ed. James Elkins (New York: Routledge, 2007), 53.

practicing portrait photographer and teacher of portrait photography, her insight speaks to me directly. I am often asked by my students if what we do--that is, if taking pictures of babies, high school seniors, weddings--is art. The question sparks a curiosity in me about how these photographs are measured in the artworld. Modern student painters of portraits may debate their skills or the success of their work, but they do not ask if what they are creating is art. Why is there hesitation among portrait photographers? The empirical answer is that galleries all over the world are filled with sculpted and painted portraits, yet commercial photographic portraits, which can look similar with regards to background choice, pose, lighting, and formality, rarely hang in art museums or are auctioned to collectors. Before the assertion that photographic portraits are devalued as an art form can be accepted, the exact meaning of a "portrait" must be discussed, as the meaning of the term can vary. My assertion may appear to be false when certain definitions of "portraiture" are adopted.

In addition to outlining the various ideas about where the technical parameters of a portrait should be drawn, it will be helpful to narrow the time frame between the comparisons being made. Although portraits, according to the most general definition of the word, have been made in various forms dating back to cave art, a comparison between all known portraits and photographic portraits would not only be a laborious task, but would also lose the impact of the results of the comparison. Therefore, it will be most helpful and meaningful to focus on the painted and sculpted portraits made between 1760 and 1830. In addition, I will be primarily discussing French portraiture. In France during this time period there was an explosion in the interest and value of portraiture. The bourgeoisie was rapidly expanding and having portraits made was in demand by this

new class of people. Photography was invented directly following this time period and in the same place. Modern commercial photographic portraiture resembles the paintings of this era most closely, both in appearance and in the commissioning process, yet the images are not accepted by the artworld. Portraiture has ebbed and flowed over various time periods and in different locations. I am focusing on French portraiture of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century because it most closely mirrors the style of commercial photographic portraiture that I claim is not accepted as fine art.

So then, what exactly is a portrait? Catherine Soussloff, Robert Rosenblum, and Shearer West offer three definitions of a portrait which differ, at least slightly, from the dictionary definition. The dictionary definition states simply that a portrait is a representation of a person. In her book *The Subject in Art*, Soussloff changes this definition slightly. Her change, which she emphasized with italics, is that portraits are “*depictions of the subject in art.*”<sup>38</sup> Rosenblum, writing an essay for the anthology *Citizens and Kings*, titled “Portraiture: Facts versus Fiction,” agrees that the portrait includes an identifiable person. For Rosenblum, this is not a limiting factor, rather one that allows works of modern art by Picasso and Matisse and impressionist works by Monet, Cezanne, and Renoir to be evaluated as portraits.<sup>39</sup>

These broad definitions of the term “portrait” are used by art historians, artists themselves, and by the public, and would allow for almost any image of a person, as long as the person could somehow be identified, to be labeled as portraiture. Shearer West,

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<sup>38</sup> Catherine M. Soussloff, *The Subject in Art: Portraiture and the Birth of the Modern*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 2.

<sup>39</sup> Robert Rosenblum, “Portraiture: Fact versus Fiction” in *Citizens and Kings: Portraits in the Age of Revolution 1760-1830*, (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2007), 15. Rosenblum includes these works because, although the figures are quite obscured by the painting technique, we can identify them.

however, lays out a very specific definition of a portrait in her book, *Portraiture*.

According to West, a portrait has three necessary elements. First, she says, a portrait is “a work that represents a unique individual.”<sup>40</sup> While her first condition is more or less in line with the general view referenced above, her second and third qualifications narrow the definition considerably. West states that the primary purpose of the portrait is to accurately convey the physical appearance of that individual as well as their individual character traits, and finally that “all portraits involve a series of negotiations.”<sup>41</sup> West says that negotiations are held between the artist, the subject, and the commissioner, and that they involve the exchange of money. The fact that the subject is another human who is either paying for or having an outside party pay for a likeness of herself influences the outcome of portraits in a way that is different from other genres of commissioned work. For example, when an artist was commissioned to paint a history painting or a landscape, there were expectations, certainly, but the subject itself was not present and conversing with the artist. The tree would not be disappointed if its bark was painted too roughly, nor would St. Paul scold Leonardo da Vinci for placing him in the wrong seat in the painting, *The Last Supper*. It is true that the person who commissioned the work could be unhappy with the results, but when the subject of the painting is a person who is present while the work is being created, the process and the expectation on the artist are decidedly different.

If only the more general definition of portraiture is accepted, it is plain that there is not a noticeable difference in the number of painted images versus the number of photographic images that depict a person which are accepted as art. This is especially

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<sup>40</sup> West, 21.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

true when the quantity is adjusted for the fact that photography has existed for less than 200 years. A more interesting comparison is made when West's narrow definition is adopted.

Adopting, at least temporarily, West's three criteria for portraiture allows for a more apt comparison. Modern commercial portraits such as weddings, families, children, and high school senior images, meet West's conditions for portraiture as well as do painted portraits of the chosen place and time period. Photographic portraits can look visually similar, yet painted portraits are accepted as fine art by the public and by the artworld, whereas photographic images are not, even if they were made to look nearly identical in pose, clothing, lighting, and expression. The phrase "accepted as fine art" means that they are hanging on gallery walls, are bought and sold by strangers at art auctions, and are studied as art by art historians and critics who also study the creators.

Taking West's definition in parts, we can uncover exactly which types of images of people it would not regard as a portrait. West's first two conditions, that a portrait must represent an actual identifiable individual and that the purpose of the work is to accurately render the physical traits and personality characteristics of that unique individual, can be discussed together. These two conditions would eliminate the modern and impressionist artists that Rosenblum sought to include. Although, as he points out, we now see that the people in the works are unique individuals, often friends and family of the artists, they are obscured by the specific techniques (cubist, impressionist) used to create the work. It is obvious that accurate rendition of the physical traits and individual character of the subjects depicted was not the objective of these works of art. Likewise, although the images Sally Mann took of her children (fig.7) and Cindy Sherman took of

herself (fig.8) clearly show the physical characteristics of specific people; they would not be portraits, by West's definition, as their primary goal is not to depict the specific traits of the individuals represented in the images. Rather, they seek to explore greater themes through their subjects.

In addition, Sherman's and Mann's works do not meet West's third criterion of necessary negotiation. Of course, negotiations are not unique to the genre of portraiture, but West points out that what is unique to portraiture is the complication of necessary negotiations between the subject and the artist, as well as between the commissioner and the artist, and perhaps even between the subject and the commissioner. Money plays an important factor in these negotiations because the person paying for the portrait typically has a specific idea about how they want the image to look. Some might argue that Mann necessarily negotiated with her children in order to acquire the images she made of them; however she did not have to negotiate with regard to money.

Modern commercial photographic portraits follow West's three conditions precisely. Surprisingly, French painted portraits of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century seem to, as well. During this tumultuous period in history in which the French and American revolutions overthrew their monarch rulers, long-standing views about who should be represented in a portrait, and how they should be represented, evolved. Before this time period, a select few souls were worthy of, and financially able to afford, a commissioned portrait. These were typically men who were leaders in some way, or people of royal or noble lineage, as well as actors, families, and women of marrying age. This was socially accepted and was woven into the concept of portraiture. It shaped the content, style, and success of the portraits before this time. The rise of the liberal

democratic state, however, brought with it a wealthy middle class of people who wanted their portraits made and published for social status and notoriety.<sup>42</sup>

Rosenblum claims that in this place and time in history, painters changed the strict standards by which they had traditionally rendered the subject of a portrait. This in turn changed the way people viewed each other. Rosenblum states that now everyone looked like “any other mortal, whether tradesman or aristocrat. Kings and Queens, the portrait tells us, are simply people.” A much larger group of people could have their image painted or sculpted, and the wealthier people of this time period were being viewed in a more approachable way. Now husbands and wives were being depicted in conversation with each other, queens and kings were shown playing with and instructing their young children and even beloved dogs of the period were the subject of portraits.<sup>43</sup> The elite were shown as being significantly less removed than ever before and the number of people being painted was greater than ever.

This change in the way the people in the portraits were being depicted, and in the number of people having their portraits made, is another example of how painted portraits and photographic portraits are similar, but does not help to clarify the question at hand. Why do these images rank as art while portraits made by photography, which can mirror them closely, do not? Sebastien Allard, writing an essay in *Citizens and Kings*, notes that the influx of portraiture during this time was not received well by the critics. He says that by 1833 the Salon in France had received a “long litany of complaints voiced by the

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<sup>42</sup> Rosenblum, 17.

<sup>43</sup> Martin Postle, “The Family Portrait,” in *Citizens and Kings: Portraits in the Age of Revolution 1760-1830*, (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2007), 188-89.



critics” of portraiture.<sup>44</sup> The change from a ruling monarch to a democracy also changed the way in which art was funded. Instead of large commissions, “the state was transferring the task of encouraging the arts to the private sector, where, in general, individual interest was allowed to take precedence over the general interest.”<sup>45</sup> This was a time when the ruling bourgeoisie was acquiring material objects. Instead of art being used as an instructive ideal for the masses to emulate, art was being acquired by the masses. In this way, “Art appeared to be being reduced to a material possession” which everybody wanted for themselves in the form of a portrait on display in an ornate frame at the salon.<sup>46</sup>

According to Allard, the direct connection portraiture had with the bourgeoisie, the sheer number of portraits being created at this time, and the view of portraits as a desired material possession, all contributed to the perception of the decline of portraiture as an art by many critics of the time. West’s third condition for portraits comes back into play here. During this time period in France, when the commissioning party moved from the government to the individual, the artist was required to negotiate with the commissioner in a new way.

To be required to negotiate removes a portion of the creative power of the image-making process from the artist and divides it between the maker and the negotiator. When the negotiator is the subject, expectations shift even more dramatically. Now, the subjects were the bourgeoisie, and they had expectations about the way they wanted to

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<sup>44</sup> Sebastien Allard, “Between the Novel and History: French Portraiture towards 1835,” in *Citizens and Kings: Portraits in the Age of Revolution 1760-1830*, (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2007), 37.

<sup>45</sup> Allard, 37.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 39.

look in a portrait that was to be publicly displayed. Allard shares an observation by Alphonse Karr; not only were the women of the bourgeoisie in essence “prostituting themselves” by showing off in public in this way, but the painter was prostituting himself as well, as it was his “duty [. . .] to satisfy the whims of the model, to the extent sometimes of having to abandon his artistic principle.”<sup>47</sup> Modern commercial photographic portraiture falls prey to the same conditions. The subject and the photographer are intimately connected in the making of the image. While the subject may choose a photographer with a particular style, money is exchanged and the photographer often caters to the wishes of the paying client, especially given the common principle of business which claims that the customer is always right.

Modern commercial photographic portraiture parallels painted French portraiture of the turn of the eighteenth century. Just as this specific time period played a critical role in the way that portraits were being viewed, this time period directly affected the view of the photographic portrait, which would be just as sought after in the 1840’s and beyond. Painted portraits were now desired by the bourgeoisie, which greatly expanded the number of people who had paintings made of themselves. Likewise, when photographic inventions were made public in 1839, it granted the possibility of getting a likeness of oneself to the general public. This was especially true after 1851 when Frederick Scott Archer invented the wet-glass negative process and chose not to patent it,<sup>48</sup> leaving a relatively fast photographic process with a reusable negative for making unlimited prints available to everyone. Photography, too, was a continued part of the

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<sup>47</sup> Allard, 41.

<sup>48</sup> Gernsheim, 75.

French craze for inclusion, material possessions, and fame that was sweeping the middle classes of the time. Although painted portraits closely mirror many of the qualities of today's commercial photographic portraits, many remarkable painted portraits came out of this time period, whereas very few traditional photographic portraits share similar acclaim. How did painted portraiture rise above the critics and maintain its place as art?

The turning point for painted portraits of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century came in the 1830's when the genre itself was reevaluated. Allard notes that the pre-existing expectation for idealization of the artist's subject was the underlying problem the genre was facing. "As the pre-eminent art of imitation, portraiture was difficult to reconcile with aspiration towards an ideal which was supposed to drive the arts."<sup>49</sup> West agrees, "An emphasis on the need for the creative artist to invent and represent ideal images lingered from Renaissance art theory . . . [but] portraiture's putative association with copy and imitation has often caused [it] to be dismissed."<sup>50</sup> The genre of portraiture had a difficult time figuring out how to idealize a scene because "the scene" in the case of portraiture is an actual person who wanted a likeness of themselves. French critics of this time period handled this by reevaluating portraiture in relation to modernity and realized that "hierarchy had to be reconsidered from a less formal point of view."<sup>51</sup> Sir Thomas Lawrence (1769-1830) is one example of a noted portrait painter who was able to bring together the two opposing sides of accurate likeness of the subject, which was required of a portrait, "and imagination, the essential attribute of the history painter."<sup>52</sup> By

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<sup>49</sup> Allard, 42.

<sup>50</sup> West, 12.

<sup>51</sup> Allard, 43.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 43.

“assert[ing] its role as a witness to the customs, habits and organization of a particular society at a given moment” and shifting towards the importance of the character of the sitter being respected over an idealization of the sitter, painted portraits were able to maintain their high rank and respect in the artworld.<sup>53</sup> A significant difference between modern commercial photographic portraiture and painted French portraiture of the 1760’s through 1830’s is then revealed, especially in the context of West’s strict definition of portraiture.

A crucial difference between portraits that endure in the art world and portraits that are dismissed is found by looking once again at West’s first two conditions for portraiture and realizing their deeper implication. If the reason for creating a portrait is to depict the physical traits of the individual in the image, then the goal of the portrait is nothing more than simple representation; portraits, by West’s narrow definition, make no attempt to convey the perspective of the artist about the subject being represented.<sup>54</sup> Portraiture of this time period differs in this significant way from today’s commercial photographic portraits. Yes, representations of individual people were made, their likeness and character was more or less faithfully depicted, and there was a negotiation involved. However, the painters and sculptors of this time period created enduring works of art by creating portraits that moved beyond the basic goal of depicting a person accurately. These painted portraits endured as works of art because the artist made a

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<sup>53</sup> Allard, 47.

<sup>54</sup> West herself did not adhere to her own narrow definition of portraiture with regard to her choice of “portrait” artists and “portrait” artwork represented in her book *Portraiture*.

deeper comment about the subject depicted, which in turn gives the viewer a message that is greater than a simple physical imitation of the person in the image.

Portraiture of the late eighteenth century to early nineteenth century, then, has sometimes been devalued as art. When this occurs, it is for a number of reasons. Chief among them is the necessity of imitation in portraiture. Portraiture of this time period was devalued when the meaning of the images did not extend beyond the representation of a specific individual, when it could not ignore input from the commissioning party, because it typically involved a monetary exchange, and because it appealed to a wide audience who often used it for personal gain. However, portraiture in general maintained its status as high art for two reasons. First, the meaning of the works moved beyond individual representation, and second, painted portraits of this time period continued to depend on the key element of technical skill to determine the success of the work.

When commercial portrait photography is devalued, it is for the same reasons. It often remains devalued because its meaning rarely moves beyond imitation and because photography studios are often designed to eliminate the need for technical skill, especially high-volume commercial studios. A parallel can be drawn between portrait photography and photography in general. When photography as a whole is devalued as art, it is for the same reasons as portrait photography. The mechanical nature of photography allows for the possibility that photographic portraits can be made with very little or no technical skill, and portraits are often made without the value perspective of the photographer.

Lack of necessary technical skill has been used to criticize photography as a whole; photographic images are made continuously and in great volume with very little

skill on the part of the photographer. The machine can do the work almost alone.

Professional photographers object to this accusation; however, technology has produced ever-easier and less expensive ways of taking pictures, to the point that skill is no longer required of the photographer. Although this possibility exists, photography in general is still considered a form of fine art. Using the comparison of painted portraits to photographic portraits as a foundation for understanding, the reason for this becomes clear. Technology allows for the possibility of having little technical skill and still being able to achieve results. Therefore there are almost no barriers to participating in photography. In fact, even having to carry a separate camera has been eliminated. People who would not have bothered to carry a camera around with them before now have one in their phones. This creates a world that is flooded with photographic images. However, because the photographic process through continued technological advancements has freed us from acquiring necessary technical skill, photography has reached a point where the key artistic factor that remains is the photographer's perspective.

When photography moves beyond imitation and idealization, when it keeps input from commissioning parties in check, and when the image communicates the photographer's perspective, which is a meaning that is greater than simple representation or imitation, that is when the image is art, regardless of the possibility of a lack of technical skill. It is the value perspective of the artist, communicated through the image, which makes a photograph a work of art.

#### *IV*

The importance of value perspective in photography could not be greater than at this point in the history of the art. The intimate relationship photography has with technology has promoted the democratization of photography at a pace unmatched by the greater arts of music, literature, theater, painting, and sculpture. It is true that all art forms are influenced by technology to one degree or another and that technology has granted new potential means of expression to all art forms. Photography, like all arts, is expanded by technological developments. Unlike other arts, however, photography is uniquely able to use these advances as tools to show the perspective of the photographer, without penalization for any shortcomings the artist may have in technical skill. While lack of technical skill can present barriers to achieving the desired outcome, less and less technical skill is mandatory in order to effectively communicate through photography.

From its beginning, photography has attracted a diverse set of fans and critics. From the general public and craftsman to scientists, artists, historians, and philosophers, no group has been untouched by photography. This creates a demand for continued evaluation of photography, and the pervasive fact of photography must be attributed to the conjoined relationship photography has with technology. If it is accepted that a modern theory of photographic art is needed which addresses photography's relationship with technology in order to maintain a meaningful way of discussing photographic art, let me now propose my theory of value perspective as the theory that should be adopted.

A theory of photographic art should address all art, both past and present, and should attempt to include unknown future works. Because photography was invented less than 200 years ago, every photographer that has created historically relevant or enduring images has either written text, or has had text written about them. This gives us insight into their point of view about the images they have made and their approach to the photographic process. Therefore, the value perspective theory can be reviewed through historic photographic images, sometimes by simply looking at the images themselves; while at other times the writings by the photographers or by other members of the artworld are needed.

Throughout the first several decades of photography, it seems that every image was a first of one kind or another. Maxine Du Camp was the first to photograph ancient Egypt,<sup>55</sup> while Nadar was the first to photograph from a hot air balloon, and “among the first to photograph by electric light.”<sup>56</sup> Some early images are examples of excellent technical quality, while others are examples of photographers trying to navigate the medium. While all of this inventing and experimenting was taking place, most photographers had to find ways to sell their images in order to make a living. Julia Margaret Cameron, who was mentioned as an early pursuer of photography as art, did not need to earn a living. Cameron was therefore able to make images that communicated her value perspective. Based on her own writing, writing about her works, and observation, her value perspective was successfully communicated. For example, Ford said, “One senses that she somehow got beneath her subject’s skin rather than merely charted the

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<sup>55</sup> Gernsheim, 241.

<sup>56</sup> Beaumont Newhall, *The History of Photography: from 1839 to the present day* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1964), 51.



surface contours.”<sup>57</sup> Cameron’s attempt to communicate her value perspective by going beneath the surface of her subjects is shown in her character-study style portraits (fig.1). In addition, Cameron attempted to show human nature in her photographs through light and references to religious and romantic literature (fig.9).

During this early period, many images are and should be remembered for their historic value, but would not necessarily fall into the category of fine art according to the perspective value theory. One such series of images would be those taken by Philip Henry Delamotte of the re-erection of the Crystal Palace from 1851-1854 (fig10).<sup>58</sup> Delamotte faithfully documented this event from beginning to end, but did not attempt to add his own value perspective to his images, according to Rouille. Instead, Delamotte was one of a handful of early photographers who “seized the opportunity” to put photography to “the use of industrial development.”<sup>59</sup> Contrast this with the documentary style images captured during the same time period by Charles Negre. Hirsch writes that Negre is “a model for the artist/photographer who used observation and reason to produce highly selected, subjective renditions of what he saw through the camera.”<sup>60</sup> Negre’s *Ragpicker* (fig.11) goes beyond using photography to document for commercial purposes. This image shows the value perspective of Negre through subject choice, framing, composition and the specific moment depicted. Negre choose to capture

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<sup>57</sup> Ford, 46.

<sup>58</sup> Andre Rouille, “The Rise of Photography (1851-70)” in *A History of Photography: Social and Cultural Perspectives*, ed. Jean-Claude and Andre Rouille, trans. Janet Lloyd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 45-6.

<sup>59</sup> Rouille, 46.

<sup>60</sup> Hirsch, 63.

the lives of common people, promoting common lives as being subjects worth preserving, and thereby communicated his value perspective to the viewers of his work.<sup>61</sup>

Bill Jay, a photographer and a professor of art history, proposed a philosophy of photography which places the burden of creating art on the life-time achievements of the photographer. Jay says, "Photography has no intrinsic value; the value is inherent in the photographer."<sup>62</sup> Jay believes that art can only be made by artists, and an artist is a person who devotes a lifetime to expressing his own convictions. For Jay, whether or not an image is a work of art will be determined by a review of the life of the photographer. While Jay's views are similar to the value perspective theory, they differ in at least one distinct way. The value-perspective theory allows any given image to be evaluated as art, whereas Jay finds art in the artist rather than in the created image. Gustave Le Gray was an unsuccessful painter turned portrait photographer who "clung to the past and the mythology of the artist but was forced out of business in 1860."<sup>63</sup> Le Gray is an example of a photographer that might not fit Jay's theory of photographic art because much of Le Gray's work was not focused on expression. Le Gray's lifetime efforts included a wide variety of image making, which often resulted in failure.<sup>64</sup> However, when he concentrated on his ability to see and record light, he was able to show his own value perspective through some of his individual images, such as his image of Napoleon III's army taken during a misty dawn inspection (Fig.12). I find a communicated value

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<sup>61</sup> Hirsh, 63.

<sup>62</sup> Bill Jay, *Negative/Positive: A Philosophy of Photography* (Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company, 1979), 10.

<sup>63</sup> Lemagny, 38.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 41.

perspective in Le Grey's use of morning light to backlight the very distant soldiers. This individual image, for example, could rightly be remembered as art, while his failed attempts at making a living as a painter and a portrait photographer should rightly be dismissed as not art.

As discussed above, a movement to recognize photography as its own art rather than a better or worse version of painting began in the last decades of the nineteenth century with American realist photographers, such as William Henry Jackson, who documented the landscape and people of the American West,<sup>65</sup> as well as English photographers like Peter Henry Emerson, who turned their cameras towards everyday rural life scenes and "insisted that in the modern world, science was the only authentic basis for art and photography."<sup>66</sup> Emerson created images which show his value perspective in a way similar to Negre. While Negre thought the urban poor was a worthy subject for photography, Emerson valued rural life, and showed it in his photographs (Fig.13). As the acceptance of photography as an art grew throughout the early twentieth century, so did the discussion about individual photographs by the artworld, and statements by artists about their own work. This makes images ever-easier to review and debate in terms of value perspective.

It is necessary to consider several isolated examples which differ from straightforward image making and provide challenges to theories of photographic art. First let us consider the work of Vivian Maier and ask, "Is it possible to create art without knowing it?" Vivian Maier (February 1, 1926 – April 21, 2009) was a private person who lived a

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<sup>65</sup> Marien, 126.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, 172.

somewhat isolated life. She made her living as a nanny, but had no family of her own and no close friends. After Maier died, a storage unit was found which housed Maier's photography, much of which was unprocessed.<sup>67</sup>

Maier took over 100,000 images which continue to be cataloged by those who discovered her storage unit. Although Maier died without editing her own images, or sharing them with seemingly anyone, it is clear by looking at her images that Maier had a value perspective that she was expressing through her images. It is impossible to know if Maier thought of her own work as art, but because many of her images communicate a value perspective, according to the value perspective theory, she, knowing it or not, created art.

Figure 14 is an example of what I consider to be Maier's value perspective. The image, which shows a line of waiting female workers, framed by a line created by the late day sun and the lines on the building and sidewalk, was taken in 1954. In this image I see Maier commenting on women in the work-force in this post-war period. A factor which supports my reading of the image is that Maier struggled with employment especially later in her life, and so a line of women waiting after the workday could catch her eye. Even so, it is true that this might not have been Maier's intent or that that a different viewer could create a different message about image. Perhaps the image for Maier was only about light, line, and repetition.

Ultimately, the only question the value perspective theory considers is whether or not the photographer had a value perspective which influenced the making or selecting of the image. Maier is a difficult example because we don't know which images she would

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<sup>67</sup>Maloof Collection, LTD. [www.vivianmaier.com](http://www.vivianmaier.com), 2013.

have wanted others to view. However, her work does answer the question that it is possible to create works that seem to communicate value perspective, whether or not they are thought of as art by the maker.

A second consideration has to do with works made from found images that are combined by an outside party (an artist) to communicate value perspective. For example, Penelope Umbrico, an established contemporary artist, creates one new image by combining millions of similar small snapshots. One such piece consists of 4x6 prints of the sun (from sunsets) that she appropriated from Flickr (Fig.15). Another of her images combines shots of televisions that were pictured for sale on Craigslist. Umbrico has similar works of “photo-labs for sale” images, and people silhouetted by sunsets which play on a similar value perspective.<sup>68</sup> In her statement about “Suns,” published on her website, Umbrico states her value perspective directly. She says that her on-going work, which takes its title and size from the number of images she finds through a web search on the day the work is to be printed, is “a comment on the ever increasing use of web-based photo communities, and a reflection of the ubiquity of pre-scripted collective content there.”<sup>69</sup> Through her work, Umbrico investigates web-based human activity involving photography and finds millions of the same subject. Through her work, Umbrico shows us something that is happening, something that she noticed and finds interesting, and asks the viewer to think about it too.

Another artist creating a single piece out of multiple images taken from the web is Jason Salavon. Instead of positioning the found images next to each other, as Umbrico

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<sup>68</sup> Penelope Umbrico, accessed March 24, 2013, <http://www.penelopeumbrico.net>.

<sup>69</sup> Umbrico, accessed April 20, 2013, [http://www.penelopeumbrico.net/Suns/Suns\\_State.html](http://www.penelopeumbrico.net/Suns/Suns_State.html).

does, Salavon uses a self-designed open source software program to generate the mathematical average of like images, overlapping and then merging the separate images into one. One of Salavon's series, titled "100 special moments," combines 100 images each of selected typically photographed events in a given person's life: Newlyweds (Fig.16), Kids with Santa, Little Leaguer, and The Graduate.<sup>70</sup> I find value perspective in these images because they consider the fact that special times in the life of an individual, which were perhaps worthy of a photograph, are not particularly special in the sense that a like experience had by a stranger is so visually similar. Perhaps his value perspective is just the opposite: part of the human experience is these milestones that so many people have, or he could be saying that because all of the images look the same, they cannot accurately represent actual human experience.

The exact value perspective is not as important to the question of art as is being sure that an attempt at communicating value perspective was made. The individual pictures that Umbrico and Salavon work with would likely not be art by the standards of the value perspective theory because they were likely not taken with a desire to communicate value perspective about the subject. However, combining the images in the ways that these two artists have done is not only interesting and quite beautiful aesthetically, but also meet the value perspective condition of communicating a perspective through the subject in the image. Therefore, photographs that do not meet the criteria of the value perspective theory individually can be combined to make photographic art. Artists like Umbrico and Salavon make clear why images need to be judged separately from their makers, and why photography requires a theory of art that is

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<sup>70</sup> Jason Salavon, accessed March 24, 2013, [salavon.com/work](http://salavon.com/work).

based on the fact that technology, especially digital and internet technology, plays a foundational role in the present and future of photographic art. Modern photographic art now includes work by multi-media artists.

I have discussed how individual snapshots have been combined to create works of art, but one final consideration is the single snapshot as it was originally captured. Sara Greenough and Diane Waggoner edited *The Art of the American Snapshot: From the Collection of Robert E. Jackson*. This book reviews the place and value of snapshots from 1888-1976. In the introduction, Greenough writes about the place of the snapshot in American life and talks about the serious interest John Szarkowski<sup>71</sup> took in snapshots. Szarkowski compares “five technical components” of amateur work to professional work and finds that based on these visual standards, snapshots can equal fine art photography.<sup>72</sup>

If visual requirements are to be the foundational standard for photographic art, many pieces, including ones mentioned above, could be rejected as art. Often conceptual art does not meet high technical standards. Greenough seeks to explore the snapshot’s “historical phenomenon,” the simultaneous similarities of snapshots taken in different places, the reasons snapshots are so popular, and “the transformation of snapshot imagery over time.”<sup>73</sup> Greenough is not seeking to understand the message the often anonymous photographer was attempting to express because there was no particular message. In her own words, these photographs are “intended to function as documents of personal

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<sup>71</sup> John Szarkowski was a photographer, curator, historian and critic. He was the director of the Museum of Modern Art at New York from 1962-1991.

<sup>72</sup> Sara Greenough et al., *The Art of the American Snapshot 1888-1978: From the Collection of Robert E. Jackson*, (Washington: National Gallery of Art/Princeton University Press, 2007), 3.

<sup>73</sup> Greenough, 4.

history”<sup>74</sup> The nature and the purpose of a snapshot is to record a moment in time, but usually does not show the value perspective of the photographer about the subject. The value perspective theory does not rule out entire categories, nor does it find entire categories of images to accept or value under the label of “art.” Instead, it considers each image individually. Therefore, we can only conclude that snapshots which do not communicate the value perspective of the photographer are not art, but that any given snapshot could be. However, if it were, it would no longer be a snapshot by the usual definition of “snapshot,” rather it would be art created in the snapshot format in order to communicate a value perspective. An example of this is *Polaroid #1* (Fig.17), by Laurel Nakadate.

With the case presented for a theory specific to photography, and a discussion of some ways that the proposed value perspective theory could be applied, let me now turn to the question of why an existing theory of art cannot be applied to photography. Prominent theories of modern art are found in the philosophies of George Dickie, Arthur Danto, and R.G. Collingwood.

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid, 2.



## V

Dickie's work, *Art and the Aesthetic: An Institutional Analysis*, was first published in 1974. In 1983 Dickie modified his original theory, calling it "The New Institutional Theory of Art."<sup>75</sup> The two versions make the same claim. Dickie addresses some criticisms of the first attempt in the second attempt by further explaining certain parts of his theory. Since they are quite similar I will refer to both versions collectively as "the institutional theory" and make a note of the particular version I am referring to in the footnotes.

Dickie's institutional theory of art is valuable for many reasons. The first is that Dickie effectively addresses several of the major theories preceding his own and finds them to be inadequate, making it unnecessary for me to do the same here. I will say a little bit about the imitation theory, given that photography is closely attached to imitation. The imitation theory, which claims that art must imitate, was accepted from the time of Socrates to "sometime in the middle of the nineteenth century."<sup>76</sup> Dickie dismisses this theory by calling attention to the fact that simply because a vast majority of art shares a certain property, in this case imitation, it does not make that shared property a defining or essential property of art. Nonobjective art further reveals that representation or imitation is not a common property of all art. With the abandonment of the imitation

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<sup>75</sup> George Dickie, "The New Institutional Theory of Art" in *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art: The Analytic Tradition*, ed. Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004)

<sup>76</sup> Dickie, *Institutional*, 19.

theory came various expressive theories which were also unsatisfying according to Dickie.<sup>77</sup> Dickie refers to the imitation theory and the expressive theories as “traditional” theories of art.

Dickie begins his own definition of art by saying that his theory, similar to value perspective theory, is one that includes the entire continuum of art, from the bad or mediocre to the masterpiece.<sup>78</sup> He says that although they are incomplete, one important aspect of the traditional theories of art is that they “assume that works of art are artifacts.”<sup>79</sup> Dickie's institutional theory relies on the same claim. Dickie's use of the word artifact is no different than the common definition; an artifact is simply an object made by man. Dickie emphasizes the “made by man” over the “object” portion of the definition by including creative works made by man that are not physical objects, like poems, performances, and improvised dances.

By making the artifact a necessary component of his theory, Dickie rejects the contemporary theories of art of his day, which came after the expressive theories. These theories, which he calls the “new conception of art,”<sup>80</sup> claim that works of art have “no common feature of any theoretical significance,” and simply become art by looking like a work that has been accepted as art in the past.<sup>81</sup> Dickie identifies the infinite regress of this theory. The first piece of art obviously could not have resembled any prior work of

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<sup>77</sup> I will be discussing G.G. Collingwood's expressive theory of art at length following my discussion of George Dickie and Arthur Danto, since it could be argued that the value perspective theory is a type of expressive theory and that is very similar to Collingwood's.

<sup>78</sup> Dickie, “New,” 47.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid, 47-8.

art; therefore, a logical conclusion is that at the bottom of this infinite regress is an artifact.<sup>82</sup> For Dickie this proves that the term “art” can be defined, and that art being an artifact is part of that definition. However, Dickie says that the artifact cannot stand alone as a complete definition of art.<sup>83</sup>

In addition to being an artifact, according to the institutional theory of art, a work of art must also be “a set of the aspects of which has had conferred upon it the status of candidate for appreciation by some person or persons acting on behalf of a certain social institution (the artworld).”<sup>84</sup> Dickie breaks down this seemingly complicated condition by discussing in length its four main points; “(1) acting on behalf of an institution, (2) conferring of status, (3) being a candidate, and (4) appreciation.”<sup>85</sup> From this discussion we learn that Dickie borrows the term “artworld” from Danto and uses it as a way to describe the general and casual institution, or network, of all parties associated with art in basically any manner. Some of the people Dickie lists as members of the artworld include “artists, producers, museum directors, museum-goers, theater-goers, reporters . . . , critics . . . , art historians, art theorists, philosophers of art, and others.”<sup>86</sup> In addition, the artworld has many subcategories. For example, the theater artworld and the music artworld are under the general umbrella of artworld, and each of those has its own subcategories such as hip hop and country as subcategory artworlds of the music artworld. Dickie does not seek to give a complete and definitive definition of the

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid, 48.

<sup>83</sup> Dickie, “New,” 49.

<sup>84</sup> Dickie, *Institutional*, 34.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid, 35-6.

artworld, but suggests that anybody associated with the arts, or the particular art in question, is part of the artworld.

The word “institution” implies formality, which implies a limit to creativity. Dickie denies both implications. He says that the artworld is not a formal institution like our legal system, but an institution in the sense that it is “an established practice.”<sup>87</sup> Most importantly, Dickie says that at minimum the artworld (or any given subdivision) must consist of an artist who makes the artwork, a “presenter” of the artwork, and a “goer” or someone who appreciates the presented artwork,<sup>88</sup> although these do not have to be separate people. The artist, the presenter, and the goer are “institutionalized” according to Dickie in the sense that they learn their role in the artworld by their participation in it and by the history of the group in general, similar to going from a corporate work environment to a labor work environment. There is no formal institution for either of these groups, rather there are various people within and associated with the given group through whom a new person learns their way. In this way, he says, “a theater-goer is not just someone who happens to enter a theater; he is a person who enters with certain expectations and knowledge about what he will experience and an understanding of how he should behave in the face of what he will experience.”<sup>89</sup> Although this seems like it could be a fairly strict condition, Dickie goes on to say that the artist can be all three parties. Therefore, even if an artifact is only seen by the artist, it is still art if the artist, as a knowing member of the artworld, views it as such. Not that it *could* still be art, but that

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid, 31. For a more complete explanation of “a practice,” I recommend reading Alisdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid, 36.

<sup>89</sup> Dickie, *Institutional*, 36.

it *is* art, however good or bad.<sup>90</sup> Dickie makes clear that the work simply has to be a candidate for appreciation to be art. It does not actually have to be appreciated, but must simply have the potential for appreciation. Dickie discusses this in response to an early criticism, and grants that if something could not be appreciated it could not be art under his theory, but says it is a moot point because he can think of nothing that could not be potentially appreciated.<sup>91</sup>

Some found it hard to appreciate works like those of Marcel Duchamp, which simple artifact theories dismiss, but any theory of art is served by considering works that stand outside the norm. For Dickie's, this means accounting for pieces like Duchamp's ready-made art which was "rediscovered" in the 1940's. Dickie says that although an artifact is made by "altering some preexisting material,"<sup>92</sup> found art and ready-made art does not physically alter anything. For Dickie, these things can be included as works of art because they change from simple objects to complex objects by being presented as art to "an artworld system."<sup>93</sup> Since art can be any object that is presented as a "candidate for appreciation by some person or persons acting on behalf of a certain social institution (the artworld),"<sup>94</sup> the object can be found in nature, man-made, mass produced, or uniquely created by the artist. How the object came to be a candidate for appreciation does not matter. For Dickie, what does matter is that someone in the artworld, usually the artist, views the object as art, and asks that it be viewed as art by others in the artworld.

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid, 38.

<sup>91</sup> Dickie, *Institutional*, 39.

<sup>92</sup> Dickie, "New," 49.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid, 34.

So then, Duchamp's object, a standard factory-made urinal which he titled *Fountain*, should be considered a work of art (again, however good or bad,) because Duchamp presented an object to the artworld for consideration as art.

The recognition and development of the artworld institution as a necessary context of art is another valuable contribution. The name "institutional theory of art" suggests that the informal institution described by Dickie is the governing body which decides which artifacts are art, but in fact, the artworld is simply a needed structure through which art is assessed. Recalling that the artworld needs an artist, a presenter, and a potential appreciator, and that the same person can be all three, we see that the artist is often the first to view an artifact as art. The artist is the first to potentially appreciate the work presented: made by him, presented to him, appreciated as art initially by him. Although he alone does not decide if the work he calls art is good, and he can certainly be shamed by other members of the artworld for a bad decision, existence within the artworld institution allows the artist the initial assessment.

Dickie uses paintings done by a chimpanzee as another example of how the institutional theory works. He says that when these paintings were shown in the Field Museum of Natural History they were not art, but if they had been shown at the Chicago Art Institute, "they would have been works of art—the paintings would have been art if the director of the Art Institute had been willing to go out on a limb for his fellow primates."<sup>95</sup> Although Dickie is recognizing the artworld, he is not claiming that the artworld decides what art is and what is not. Instead, something is art when it is presented as art to the artworld. In the case of the chimps, who cannot present an artifact

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<sup>95</sup> Dickie, *Institutional*, 46

as art to an artworld for themselves as a human can, another member of the art world would be the presenter, while the potential appreciator of the art would be the same person as well as all of us who went to see the exhibit.

The person who calls an artifact art is doing so with the learned behavior of the artworld institution, and appreciating something as art does not guarantee agreement by other members of the artworld. Even so, because the initial assessment can be done by a single member of the artworld based on the experience they have within the artworld, Dickie's institutional theory cannot work for photographic art for two reasons. First, the institution has changed and second Dickie's definition of art is circular.

First, I claim that the institution has changed, but perhaps that only warrants a slight adjustment rather than a completely new theory. Dickie considers additional qualifications to individual subcategories of the artworld. Specifically he notes that paintings must be original to be art, but that this would not be a necessary condition for other kinds of art, therefore it is not included in his broad definition of art. If painting can have specific conditions unique to it, then perhaps photography is simply one of the subcategories of the artworld that also requires additional criteria. Perhaps the value perspective, or some other criterion, is a needed condition for photography as originality is to painting.

The problem goes deeper, however. Adding additional criteria will not change the fact that Dickie's theory is based on a pre-digital concept of the photographic artworld. Digital and internet technology have changed the photographic process so much that the institution referred to by Dickie has significantly changed. For example, if we compare Dickie's theater-goer described above to the equivalent potential appreciator of

photography today, the changes are evident. A person who looks at photography “with certain expectations and knowledge about what he will experience and understanding about how he will behave in the face of what he will experience” is nearly every Western person, because the twenty-first century person is no longer separate from photography. Rare is the Western person who has no connection at all with photography. Although there are people who live within modern society who are not particularly interested in photography, even a person who makes no effort towards photography is surrounded by it simply through engagement in everyday life. Knowing something’s opposite is a helpful way to define that thing, but a “photo-goer in 2013,” so to speak, is a person that has almost no opposite. To acknowledge the photo equivalent of the theater-goer as someone who is meaningful, we must also have someone who chooses to avoid photography. However, unlike the theater, photography is increasingly difficult to avoid, which gives members of society the impression that they understand the practice of photography.

The lack of people unassociated with photography may not be a fatal problem, but the circular definition Dickie provides for art is. Dickie addresses this problem, saying that while his definition is possibly circular, the institutional theory is not viciously so, because the circle is not so small as to be “*uninformative*”<sup>96</sup> He says that although it is impossible to describe the artworld without using the term “art,” his lengthy discussion of the artworld gives enough information to eliminate the notion of a small, meaningless circle, and is therefore not vicious.

If Dickie’s circle was at one time large, time and technology have made it so small as to now be uninformative. Dickie claims that “every person who sees himself as a

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid, 43. The italics here are Dickie’s.



member [of the artworld] is,”<sup>97</sup> that the artist can act as all three necessary components of the artworld institution,<sup>98</sup> and that the christening of a work of art *as* art is all that is required.<sup>99</sup> Dickie reminds the reader that the act of christening has institutional weight, but given the democratization of the photographic institution discussed earlier, the weight of the photographic artworld has been significantly reduced if for no other reason than the sheer size of it. When a select few do the christening, the ceremony has weight. Consider what would happen if every person who felt part of a church-world was allowed to baptize their own child. Who would employ the minister or value the ceremony or its results? Similarly, the photographic artworld, according to the definition given by the institutional theory, is an internationally connected community of over two billion people who are surrounded by photographs, capable of making photographs, and therefore qualified, according to the institutional theory, to christen their own images as art.

Dickie might object that this is too broad an interpretation of what he means by being part of the artworld. He emphasizes that the artworld “is not just a collection of people,” but people who have knowledge and understanding “similar to that of the artist.”<sup>100</sup> These qualifications were meaningful at one time and perhaps still are for other forms of art, but because of photography’s relationship with technology and the accessibility of technology, nearly everyone can and does take pictures. Therefore, nearly everyone believes, rightly, that they have at least some knowledge and understanding similar to that of the photographic artist. The expectation of the artist to know and

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<sup>97</sup> Dickie, *Institutional*, 36.

<sup>98</sup> Dickie, “New,” 51.

<sup>99</sup> Dickie, *Institutional*, 49.

<sup>100</sup> Dickie, “New,” 51.

understand their particular art and the practice of it is not an informative way to understand the photographic art world.

Dickie's circular definition of art as it applies to photography is as follows: an artist is a person who creates a photograph they consider to be a work of art; they believe it is a work of art because of their knowledge, experience, and practice in the photographic artworld; and the photographic artworld consists of people who involve themselves in some way in the practice of photographic art. Dickie states that he cannot give a complete definition of the artworld, yet he asks us to base our understanding of what art is on this incomplete, and ultimately circular, concept. Taken on good faith, the idea of the artworld is understandable, but when my students ask me if they are artists, the answer is unclear if I rely on Dickie's vague definition for direction. Dickie's definition provides little distinction between a vernacular photographer and a fine art photographer of the twenty-first century. The vernacular photographer believes that they have the knowledge and understanding of someone who creates photographic images, because they actually create photographic images themselves. The general public is part of the photographic artworld.

The artworld is still the framework within which the practice of art develops. However, determining what is and is not art cannot be left to vaguely defined members of the artworld. A theory for photographic art must provide a system for photographers and members of the photographic artworld to critically assess their own and others' images. If we accept as many images as Dickie's theory could allow, the term photographic art is no longer very meaningful. I agree that technical skill can no longer be the foundational

principle by which to determine art, but something more must be required of a photograph before it is called art.

Going back to *Fountain*, we can see that in addition to presenting an artifact to the artworld, Duchamp did something else. He found an object and presented it to the artworld in a way that showed that he had a value perspective to communicate to the viewers. Duchamp added the title *Fountain*; object was shocking to the artworld; he hung the urinal sideways; and he signed the work R. Mutt. All of these details indicate that Duchamp was attempting to communicate his value perspective to the artworld. In much the same way, photographic artists ask the public to look at the world in the way that they see it, even though they often do not create or assemble the subject being photographed. *Fountain* is art by either the value perspective theory or the institutional theory. However, if Duchamp had not added the title, hung the urinal sideways, and signed the work R. Mutt, but simply submitted an unchanged urinal for consideration as art, the institutional theory says it is art, while the value perspective theory says it is not.

Perhaps, if the institutions described by Dickie are changing as I suggest, then this could signal the end of a need to distinguish good art from bad art. If we stop distinguishing good art from bad art, then the special category of things called art would be replaced by opinions based on taste. I like it, and you don't. Both are acceptable, but neither view matters in a larger sense. In addition, if this is true, the institutional theory of art, without its institution, becomes irrelevant.

However, a world in which we no longer ponder the merits of art is not the world we practically live in. We do think and debate about art, therefore we should not stop chipping away at finding an accurate definition of photographic art. If the institutional

theory was that definition at one time, it no longer is. Ted Cohen says, “It has finally come to me that if art is what the institutional theory says, then I cannot imagine why anyone would *care* whether something were art.”<sup>101</sup> This is what any given theory of photographic art should prevent, but the institutional theory of art does not precisely enough describe, or limit, the artworld, rendering his theory based on it an unsatisfactory solution. Dickie’s definition of art, still partially undefined, is left meaningless in a practical way. The institutional theory, then, is not a definitively helpful structure through which to determine photographic art.

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<sup>101</sup> Ted Cohen Ted Cohen, “Reflections on One Idea of Collingwood’s Aesthetics,” *The Monist* 72, no. 4 (October, 1989): 581.

## VI

Similar to the value perspective theory, Arthur Danto's transfiguration theory asks the artist to communicate something to the viewer, but unlike the value perspective theory, Danto asks the artist to create a metaphor within the work for the viewer to interpret. Danto begins by discussing Pieter Breughel's painting, *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* (Fig.18).

At first glance, the viewer of *Icarus* sees a ploughing farmer and a boat sailing the sunlit sea. The painting looks like a simple depiction of everyday life on a pleasant afternoon. A tiny pair of legs can be seen very small in the bottom right corner of the frame popping up from the water. Danto points out that if we didn't have the title to guide us, the viewer could assume that the legs belonged to a swimmer enjoying the water rather than a boy who had just plummeted to his death. Danto's greater meaning about the connection between a work of art and a title helping the viewer does not fully reveal itself through his initial discussion of Breughel's work. Instead, Danto presses forward, showing how the painting could be interpreted in various ways if it had different titles such as *Landscape #12*, or *Works and Pleasure*.<sup>102</sup> Danto's discussion of the interaction between title and viewer lays the groundwork for his transfiguration theory. He says, ". . . responding to a painting complements the making of one, and spectator

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<sup>102</sup> Danto, 117-18.

stands to artist as reader to writer in a kind of spontaneous collaboration.”<sup>103</sup> The title of a painting and the way in which the viewer interacts with the title and the painting are, however, not Danto’s stopping point. To further explain his theory of art he leaves *Icarus* behind.

Next, Danto invents a situational story in which two different paintings, created by different artists, are presented to the artworld. The paintings are the result of a contest. They are kept completely secret while in the making, but when revealed, the two paintings look exactly alike. Although identical in appearance (both the same size of vertical rectangle with one line drawn horizontally through the exact center of the rectangle), the paintings are different in content. The first painting represents Newton’s third law of motion and depicts two equal masses one on top pressing down, and one on bottom pressing up. The second painting depicts Newton’s first law of motion. The line in the exact center of this painting, rather than representing the line where two masses meet, depicts “the path of a single isolated particle” which has no force acting on it. Danto tells us that the second painting is found to be a success while the first is a failure because the second artist did a better job at creating a metaphor for the viewer to interpret. He then goes on to explain at great length all of the ways the second painting can be viewed and interpreted.<sup>104</sup>

Danto argues that even when two images look exactly the same, one can be art while the other is not, due to the content of the representations. Danto is not claiming that content is art, however, although he does claim that good art causes a transformative

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid, 119.

<sup>104</sup> Danto, 122.

interpretation. He describes this event as similar to a person going from seeing words on a page, to being able to read, or realizing that the Copernican system is correct rather than the Ptolemaic system. He says, “Nothing in the world will have undergone change, but *you* through a vertiginous transformation of theoretical parallax, are thrust out into the heavens from having hugged the center.”<sup>105</sup> In other words, the viewer understands what the artist was trying to say. For Danto an object “transforms” into art through this experience of the viewer interpreting a given metaphor presented by the artist in his created work.

Danto’s lengthy discussion through these examples about the importance of title and content is to acknowledge the importance of the artworld in fostering the interpretation of the artwork. Danto agrees that there is a “germ of truth in saying without the artworld there is not art,”<sup>106</sup> but he maintains that the neither the artworld nor its members determine art.<sup>107</sup> Rather, because of the artworld the viewer is possibly better able to interpret the meaning of the metaphor in the work. Danto only allows that the artworld helps the viewer become more knowledgeable, thereby fostering the viewer’s ability to interpret an object. For example, if you did not know the story of Icarus, it would be difficult to guess what Breughel might be trying to say. The artworld can help you understand the story and in this way interpret Brueghel’s painting.

Danto’s transfiguration theory, although similar to the value perspective theory, requires that a work of art intentionally leave some part of the message for the viewer to

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<sup>105</sup> Danto, 125.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Danto says, “. . . we will systematically be forced into the worst caricatured formulations of the Institutional Theory of Art; that is art which is so designated by the effete snobs of the artworld.” 144.

interpret. The part that the artist leaves out is to be filled in by the viewer. What started out as quite parallel to the value perspective theory quickly becomes an important difference. For example, Herb Ritts created many images which challenge social gender identification, boundaries, and roles, such as Madonna grabbing her crotch, male nude dancers, and bodies in nude embrace which are opposite sex, but appear the same sex (Fig. 19). While Danto asks for the message to be concealed, these images are straightforward in that they do not try to conceal the fact that the artist is attempting to communicate his value perspective on the subject. I claim that Ritts is asking society to view and challenge gender roles and boundaries. Therefore, I would argue that these particular works by Ritts as express value perspective, and as such, are photographic art, while many of his fashion images are not art, but commercial works.

While I would also argue that Ritts' value perspective is straightforward, someone could argue the opposite. Value perspective allows a photograph to be art, whether or not something is left for the viewer to interpret. The condition of viewer interpretation is difficult for photographic art, as photographic images are often thought of as straightforward. For example, the photograph Robert Mapplethorpe took of himself with a bull-whip inserted into his anal canal (Fig. 20) leaves even less to be to be interpreted than Ritts' *Tony and Mimi*. It is clear that Mapplethorpe is expressing his value perspective in his *Bullwhip* image. While there is always more than one way an image can be interpreted, even with an image as bold as Mapplethorpe's, the key to photographic art is knowing that the artist intends to communicate to you his unique perspective through the specific medium of photography.



Danto claims that art requires the artist to at least partially conceal his intended message, and claims that if the artist fails to do so, it is either bad art or not art at all. Value perspective theory insists upon the exact opposite. It requires the artist to have something specific to say that reflects his own idea, stance, or thoughts about what he chose to photograph. The best photographic art is thought provoking, not because the viewer must work to understand the message, but because when the message (or one of the possible messages) is successfully communicated it pushes the viewer to consider how that message resonates in her own life or with the human condition in general.

This is not to say that a photograph which must be interpreted cannot be art. Even if an artist wrote his value perspective on a piece of paper and photographed it, the image would still require interpretation. Interpretation at a minimum level at least, is part of almost all human interactions. *The Fall of Icarus* must be interpreted, but when we view the painting together with the title, it seems likely that Brueghel was making a value perspective comment about suffering. I claim that this message, his value perspective, is what makes this a work of art rather than the effort the viewer must exert in order to understand an artist created metaphor. Although Danto's transfiguration theory of art expects interpretation, which many photographic images possess, it is not the distinguishing factor which separates art images from other types of photographic images and therefore cannot be adopted by the photographic artworld.

## VII

A theory of art that appears to be similar to the value perspective theory is found in R.G. Collingwood's book, *Principles of Art*. The fact that Collingwood's theory has been disputed and that it appears to be similar to the value perspective theory provides good reasons to discuss it here. *The Principles of Art* is divided into three sections. In the first section he gives a history of the understanding or usage of the term "art" in order to differentiate between what is "art proper," and what it is that we call art simply because it is convenient or historic to use that word. Collingwood insists that before anyone can answer the question, "What is Art," the meaning of the word art must be completely understood.<sup>108</sup> John Grant summarizes Collingwood's goal in book one as "first to settle on the sense or senses in which the word 'art' is to be used, and second, having done this, to investigate the nature of the activity to which 'art' so defined refers."<sup>109</sup> As Collingwood points out, the meanings behind the multiple uses of the word vary. It is neither informative to continue to use a word while interchanging the meanings, nor is it a sound foundation for a theory to be built on. A precise account of the usage of the word is needed before a definition or theory of art can be established.

Collingwood finds that the word art is used improperly in several ways. Craft is the proper name of the first type he investigates. Collingwood describes six

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<sup>108</sup> Collingwood, 1.

<sup>109</sup> John Grand, "On Reading Collingwood's *Principles of Art*," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 46, no. 2 (Winter, 1987): 239.

characteristics of craft, and emphasizes that crafts are created by precise planning. He notes, however, that it does not follow that art proper can have no planning; simply that art proper may or may not, while craft must.<sup>110</sup> In addition, a craft could be identified by its distinction between means and end, raw material and finished product, and material and form, or by its “hierarchical relation between various crafts.”<sup>111</sup> By separating craft from art and showing that craft is not art, Collingwood is then able to reject the “doctrine of artist technique,” which holds that art is technique. Collingwood claims that technique might serve to separate better and worse art, but technique in itself cannot make art. Technique is not the essence of art, but is a definitive property of the thing we should call craft.<sup>112</sup>

In much the same way, Collingwood dismisses the idea that representation is art. First he separates the terms imitation and representation, which are often used interchangeably. Collingwood claims that imitation is a copy of a similar thing, while representation is related to nature, or something that is not art.<sup>113</sup> For example, my attempt to paint the *Mona Lisa*, even if it was an excellent copy or “imitation,” is not art. Representations, however, or works that depict something in nature, are separate from imitation. Collingwood agrees that art can be a representation, such as the way the actual *Mona Lisa* represents something in nature, but that representation itself is not art. In other words, for Collingwood, the defining property of art is not representation. After

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<sup>110</sup> Collingwood, 22.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid, 15-6.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid, 26.

<sup>113</sup> Collingwood, 42.

separating art as magic and art as amusement as he did with craft, Collingwood turns his attention from all of the things that art is not, to what art proper is.

In order to discover what art is, Collingwood relies on his investigation of what art is not and learns that art “has something to do with emotion . . . which has a certain resemblance to arousing it,” and that “art has something to do with making things, but these things are not material things . . .”<sup>114</sup> In this way, Collingwood finds the expression of emotion to be a key element in art proper. This should not be confused with the description of emotion. Saying, “I am angry,” is not an expression of anger; it is describing anger, according to Collingwood. Art proper is a personal emotion, and not an expression of emotion that is designed to arouse a specific emotion in others. The emotion of art proper cannot be pre-meditated. Collingwood says, “It does not mean that an artist ought to be candid, it means that he is an artist only in so far as he is candid.” If the artist tries to select certain emotions and not others, that is actually “a further process of a non-artistic kind, carried out when the work of expression proper is already complete.”<sup>115</sup> Collingwood says that the significant part of art is this very specific kind of expression of emotion.

The second part of art for Collingwood is presented in a puzzle of sorts when he insists that art is something that is made, but not a material thing. His answer to the puzzle is, “imagination,” with imagination being distinct from “make-believe.” Collingwood says, “Imagination is indifferent to the distinction between the real and the

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid, 109.

<sup>115</sup> Collingwood, 115.

unreal.”<sup>116</sup> For Collingwood, the work of art is the tune heard in the composer’s head rather than the same tune being played by an orchestra. Collingwood concludes book one with the discovery that “By creating for ourselves an imaginary experience or activity, we express our emotions; and this is what we call art.”<sup>117</sup> The painting or the orchestra that shows this emotion is not the actual art, but enables the possibility that seeing the work or hearing the music that was created as a result of artist emotion will provoke an emotional response for the audience, and in that way they will know art.

In book two, Collingwood claims to simply comment on what has already been said by philosophers about art, although Grant notes that “Collingwood frequently has cause to go quite beyond the realm of established philosophical usage to stipulate entirely *new* meanings for old words, and even invent entirely new words.”<sup>118</sup> The new term invented by Collingwood is “psychical expression,” which he defines as “experience at its purely psychical level.”<sup>119</sup> Unconscious, spontaneous, physical expressions of emotion are what Collingwood says is a psychical expression, and they are the foundation, but not the end point, for Collingwood’s theory of art as language which he finalizes in book three.

The conclusion that “art must be language” is arrived at in book three by deciding that the thing that is both expressive and imaginative is language.<sup>120</sup> Collingwood says, “The aesthetic experience, or artistic activity, is the experience of expressing one’s

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid, 136.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid, 151.

<sup>118</sup> Grant, 242.

<sup>119</sup> Collingwood, 229.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid, 274.

emotions; and that which expresses them is the total imaginative activity called indifferently language or art. This is art proper.”<sup>121</sup> As Grant notes, Collingwood “completely redefined [the word language] to denote the ‘bodily expression of emotion’ that accompanies all such acts of attention or ‘imagination.’”<sup>122</sup> For Collingwood, then, art is the experience of imaginative expression of emotion. Cohen says “Art is language, according to Collingwood, and anything which is art (or language) is the expression of emotion. More strictly, it is the expression of an emotional charge upon an object of consciousness.”<sup>123</sup> Value perspective theory also allows for the expression of emotion, but it is not the expression of emotion which makes something a work of art. The thing expressed which makes an object a work of art for the value perspective theory is a personal perspective, an opinion, comment, or belief, which is more specific than an emotion.

Value perspective does not find expression of emotion to be art for one of two reasons: it is either too vague or too narrow. This paradox can be shown through the works mentioned above by Umbrico and Salavon who comment on particular aspects of modern society through their works, but may or may not in the process also be expressing emotion. Therefore, these images may not be considered works of art by Collingwood, but would be art by the value perspective theory. Whatever these two artists are expressing is certainly imaginative, but it is hard to say if they are expressing emotion because it is hard to think of anything that could not in some way be labeled an emotion.

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid, 275.

<sup>122</sup> Grant, 242.

<sup>123</sup> Cohen, 582.

Emotion is a broad term, and could even be argued to include personal perspective. In this sense Collingwood's criterion is too vague.

On the other hand Collingwood's criterion is too narrow in the sense that there is no reason to limit art to emotional expression only. For example, most snapshots express emotion, yet have no value perspective. As Danto showed, the use of the snapshot format could be used effectively to communicate a value perspective. In fact, *Umbrico* is in essence doing just that. However, when socializing with friends, or at a family holiday gathering, the snapshots that are taken are to remember the day rather than to comment on the day. The emotions of this day are also captured, and could be done so imaginatively, yet these images should not be called art.

Limiting art to a certain aspect of expression is not the problem. After all, value perspective seeks to limit art to the imaginatively expressed value perspective of the artist. The difference is found in what is included and excluded with each limit. As has been shown throughout, expression of value perspective includes photographs both past and present, whereas expression of emotion either excludes works like *Umbrico* and *Salavan* or proves to be too vague of a term to be useful. Cohen appreciates Collingwood's appeal to emotion as art. He says, the idea that when "a person has articulated his feeling sufficiently to make it accessible to others, by way of showing it to them in themselves" is "a beautiful idea" which opens the possibility of the achievement of art to "ordinary, even mundane contexts quite apart from great paintings, novels, symphonies, and the rest."<sup>124</sup> I agree, but not in a positive sense. If the possibility of achieving art is as Cohen describes, we are once again left without a reason for a category

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<sup>124</sup> Cohen, 585.

called art. Asking an image to convey emotion to be art is simply not specific enough for photography.

Although I have discussed why expression of emotion cannot be photographic art, a critic could ask why expressing a non-value perspective in general cannot be art. As was shown through our discussion of portrait photography versus painted portraiture, without value perspective, photographic images are simply imitation. Like a majority of photographic portraits, snapshots, and even some photojournalism, the non-value perspective image equates to simple documentation or imitation of a given scene. This in itself has value, but not artistic value, and must be excluded from the category of photographic art in order to foster meaningful conversations about which of those images that remain are more or less effective with the communication of their value perspective, and how meaningful that value perspective is.

As noted above, Lady Elizabeth Eastlake came to the conclusion in 1857 that photography was a new form of communication, but not art. The value perspective theory argues that photography is art when it is a specific type of communication; photographic images which show an attempt to communicate the point of view of the photographer are art. Unlike Collingwood's expression of emotion, value perspective in photographic art is not spontaneous or instinctual. Instead, it is necessarily intentional. In this way imaginative expression of emotion for the value perspective theory is like technique is to Collingwood: it could accompany photographic art, and often accompanies good art, but it does not have to. Photographic art could express emotion, but *must* intentionally express the photographer's value perspective.



Although value perspective does insist on intentional expression, it does not seek to limit the creative process associated with how the photographic art is created. The artist could know exactly what they want to say before the photo-making process begins, or they could have some intuitive idea, an instinct, or inclination about a value perspective to communicate. Perhaps the artist will plan each detail carefully before beginning to make images, or they will embark on a circular process which involves reworking, reshooting, editing and finally coming to the exact message to share. Any process could potentially produce art in the much the same way that writers have different processes. Some outline, some write and re-write. Some plan the entire piece, some discover the meaning while writing, and some change their value perspective as a result of their research in the middle of writing. When I claim that art must intentionally express, I mean that regardless of the process, before the artist can call their photograph art, the desired value perspective must be realized by them. Photographers could even free-shoot initially, and when viewing the images later realize that a particular image exactly expresses a value perspective that they would like to communicate.

With its inability to nestle neatly under the wing of an established theory of art, photography requires a theory of art which specifically considers its conjoined relationship with technology and demands that photographic art images, in order to be named as such, separate themselves through the intentional expression of the artist's value perspective.

## LIST OF FIGURES



Figure 1. Julia Margaret Cameron: *Sir John Herschel with Cap*, 1867 Albumen print, 13 3/8 x 10 3/8 in. National Portrait Gallery, London.



Figure 2. Alfred Stieglitz: *The Steerage*, 1907. Photogravure on vellum, 12 11/16 x 10 3/16 in. Alfred Stieglitz Collection.



Figure 3. Edward Steichen: *Martha Graham*, 1931. Gelatin silver print

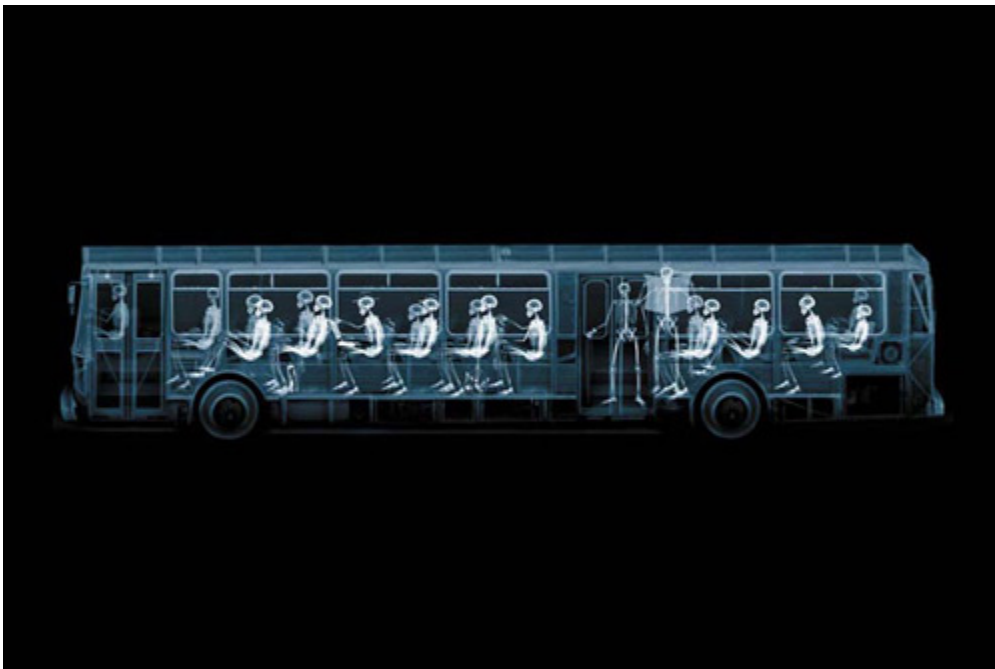


Figure 4. Nick Veasey: *Bus*, 1998. C-Type print, 59 x 23.5 in.



Figure 5. Dr. Duchenne de Boulogne: “An anatomical preparation of the muscles of the face,” from *Mecanisme de la Physionomie Humaine*, 1962. Albumen print, Getty Research Institute, Research Library.



Figure 6. Russell A. Kirsch: First scanned digital image, Kirsch's son Walden, 1957, Portland art Museum.



Figure 7. Sally Mann: *The Rehearsal Place*, 1989.



Figure 8. Cindy Sherman: *Untitled #92*, 1981. Chromogenic color print, 24 x48 inl. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. The Fellows of Photography Fund.



Figure 9. Julia Margaret Cameron: *The Parting of Sir Lancelot and Queen Guinevere*, 1874. Andrew Hichens and May Prinsep, Album print 13.5 x 10.5 in. Royal Photographic Society.



Figure 10. Philip Henry Delamontte: *Front of the Crystal Palace*, 1853, Albumen silver print. The national Monuments Record.





Figure 11. Charles Negre: *The Little Ragpicker*, 1851. Collotype, 14.6 x 11.2 cm. MoMA, Gift of Andre Jammes



Figure 12. Gustave Le Gray: *The Guard at Dawn*, 1858. Albumen silver print from glass negative, 10.5 x 13 in. Gilman Collection, Purchase, The Horance W. Goldsmith Foundation Gift through Joyce and Robert Menschel, 2005.



Figure 13. Peter Henry Emerson: *The Old Order and the New*, 1885-86, Platinum print from glass negative, Gift of Joyce F. Menschel, 2008. Author Thomas Frederick Goodall, Printer Valentine of Dundee.



Figure 14. Vivian Maier: *1954, New York, NY*. [www.vivianmaier.com/portfolio/new-york-1/](http://www.vivianmaier.com/portfolio/new-york-1/).



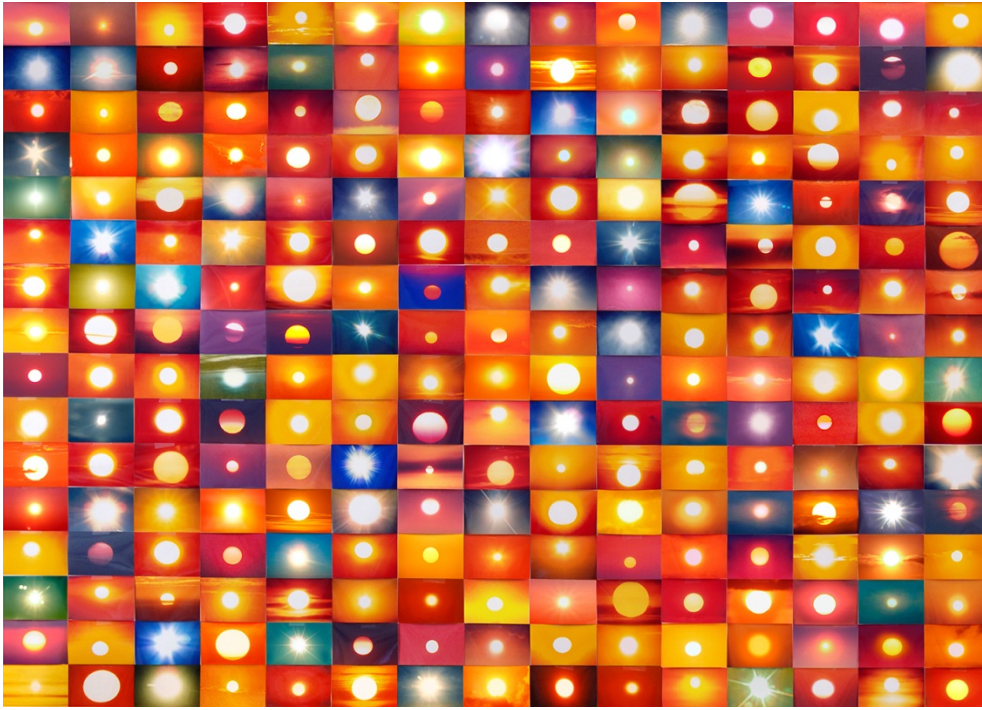


Figure 15. Penelope Umbrico: *8,730,221, Suns from Flickr (Partial)* 2/20/11, c-41 machine prints, 4 x 6 in. each, [www.penelopeumbrico.net/Suns?Suns\\_State.html](http://www.penelopeumbrico.net/Suns?Suns_State.html).



Figure 16. Jason Salavon: *100 Special Moments (Newlyweds)*, 2004. Digital C-print, Dimensions variable. 7 + 2AP's.



Figure 17. Laurel Nakadate: *Polaroid #1* from “Stay the Same Never Change,” 2008. Polaroid, 4.25 x 3.5 in.



Figure 18. Attributed to Pieter Breughel the Elder: *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*, 1560. Oil on canvas, 29 x 44 in. Musée des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels.



Figure 19. Herb Ritts: *Toni and Mimi*, 1985 Gelatin silver print. 16 x 20 in. Los Angeles.



Figure 20. Robert Mapplethorpe: *Self-Portrait with Bullwhip*, 1978. Unique gelatin silver print, 14 x14 in. Private Collection, sold April 23-24, 2007 in New York, Rockefeller Plaza.

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